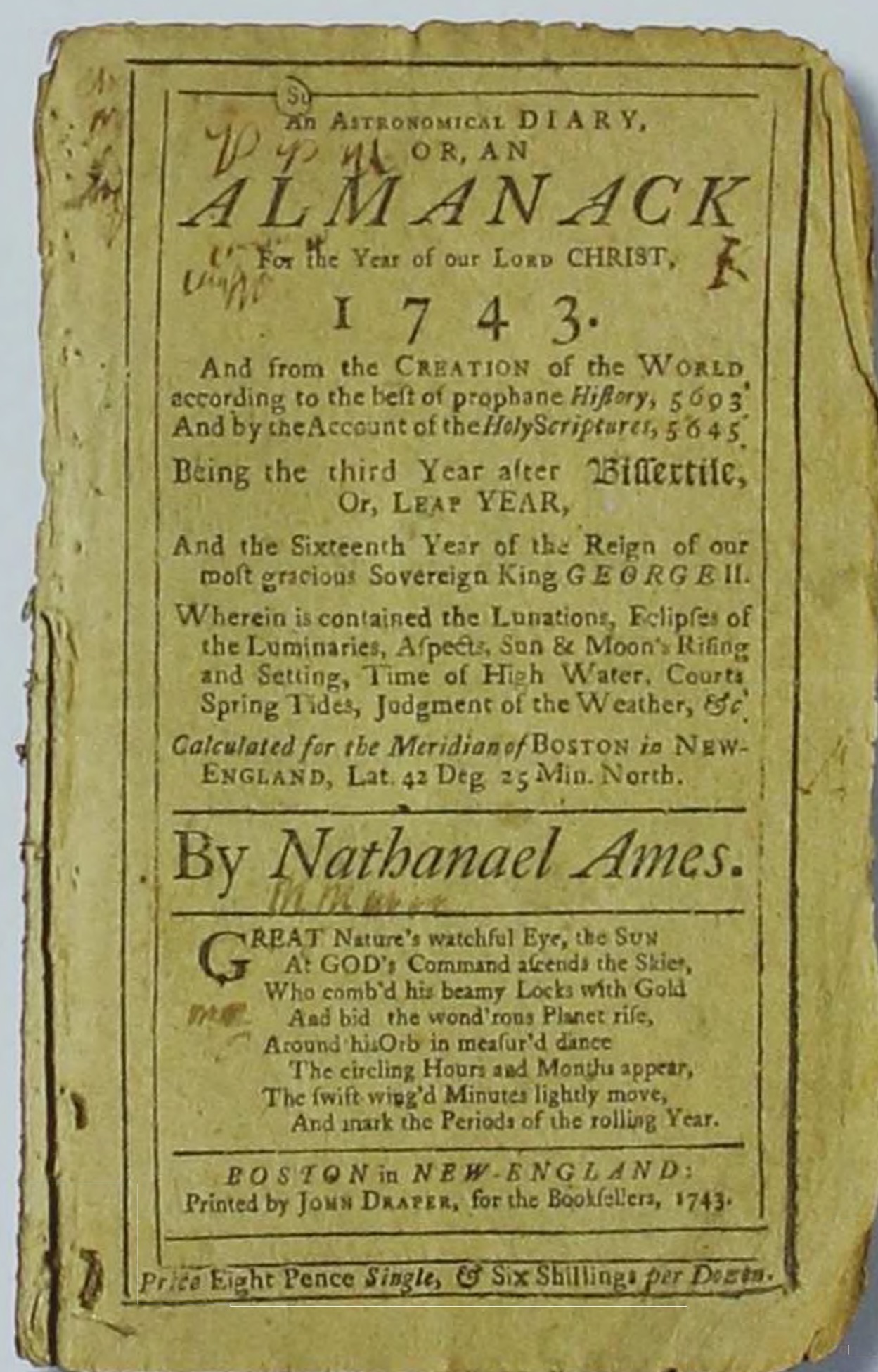


## Historical treasures from our collections



Almanacs from the 18th century remind us of our colonial era. Far left: The cover of this almanac is dated "the Sixteenth Year of the Reign of our most gracious Sovereign King GEORGE II." The next example shows a map of "the Present Seat of War" and "General Washington's Lines on New-York Island."

Self-rule and nationhood can be traced in later almanacs, which listed locations and dates of circuit courts, election returns, and names of office-holders.

## A LOOK AT THE AMERICAN ALMANAC

BY KRISTINA HUFF

**T**WO AND A HALF CENTURIES AGO, Nathaniel Ames sent a message on the last page of the 1758 almanac he published in New England:

*O! Ye unborn Inhabitants of America! Should this Page escape destin'd Conflagration at the Year's End, and these Alphabetical Letters remain legible, — when your Eyes behold the Sun after he has rolled the Seasons round for two or three Centuries more, you will know that in Anno Domini 1758, we dream'd of your Times.*

Ames was far removed in time and distance from the "unborn Inhabitants" who would make his vision of westward expansion and agricultural prosperity a reality. With visionary confidence, he imagined the possibilities of "that fertile Country to the West of the Appalachian Mountains . . . all well provided with Rivers, a very fine wholesome Air, a rich Soil, capable of producing Food

and Physick, and all Things necessary for the Convenience and Delight of Life: In fine, the Garden of the World!"

Ames and his son were perhaps the most successful developers of almanacs in the 18th century. Historian Jill Lapore estimates that "in the middle of the eighteenth century, about fifty thousand almanacs were printed in the colonies every year." Decade after decade, printers produced a smorgasboard of reasonably priced almanacs sized for portability. These handy little booklets were kept close at hand—in log cabins in New England, later in wagons headed to Indiana, and still later in farmhouses in Iowa. A few of Ames's 18th-century almanacs are among the dozens of almanacs in the State Historical Society of Iowa collections.

An almanac was a practical reference tool for the year, with detailed calendars, weather predictions, tide tables, astronomical charts, and more. Once the year was over, these particular features had outlived their usefulness. Despite this, almanacs were often kept into the following



years. An almanac, a Bible, and perhaps one or two devotional books constituted many families' entire libraries. These texts became crucial tools for teaching children to read. And when paper was scarce, the worn pages of outdated almanacs were probably used for notes, messages, food wrappings, toilet paper, and kindling "destin'd [for] Conflagration at the Year's End," as Ames had feared.

Of the hundreds of American almanacs published, two series have proven especially memorable. One of these is *Poor Richard's Almanac*, published by Benjamin Franklin under the pseudonym Richard Saunders. Although many almanacs offered advice on how to conduct one's life, *Poor Richard's Almanac* is particularly remembered for advice on how to become "healthy, wealthy, and wise." Franklin specifically identified "industry and frugality" as the cornerstone of Poor Richard's lessons.

Franklin's almanacs offered not only instruction in virtuous conduct, but also the foundations of a lifetime of literacy. As an older man looking back, he recalled the gratifying sales figures of his almanacs (nearly 10,000 each year, according to his estimates) and their laudable educational and moral mission. Proudly, he explained, "Observing that it was generally read, scarce any neighborhood in the province being without it, I consider'd it as a proper vehicle for conveying instruction among the common people, who bought scarcely any other books."

The most enduring American almanac series is *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, which in its younger years was simply known as *The Farmer's Almanac*. First published by Robert B. Thomas for the year 1793, it became an Ameri-

can institution. Continuously in print, *The Old Farmer's Almanac* reportedly still uses the same weather-prediction formula developed by Thomas in the early years.

Almanac users (even George Washington was one) often scribbled brief phrases in the generous margins to mark significant events like births and deaths or to record relevant information, like these early jottings: "The Ship at Germantown Launched September 21, 1789." "Planted Potatoes Planted french Turnips and Corn." "April 6 Bought a cow of uncle." "Bees swarmed 10th." "Finished Hay-ing July 23/1789." The pages of some surviving almanacs are marked with initials, dots, and tick marks in pencil or ink—obviously meaningful to the user but a mystery to us today. Next to the official weather predictions, users jotted down the actual weather. In a 1762 almanac one user noted "a grater drought this summer than last. Many streams were dry."

Coincidentally, one almanac told readers that rain was likely for July 4, 1876—and to "Expect Thunder."

The familiar features of almanacs made them trusted guides, even in unfamiliar territory. For those whose concerns ranged beyond the boundaries of a family farm, almanacs provided information for travelers, such as the distance between towns and the location of inns.

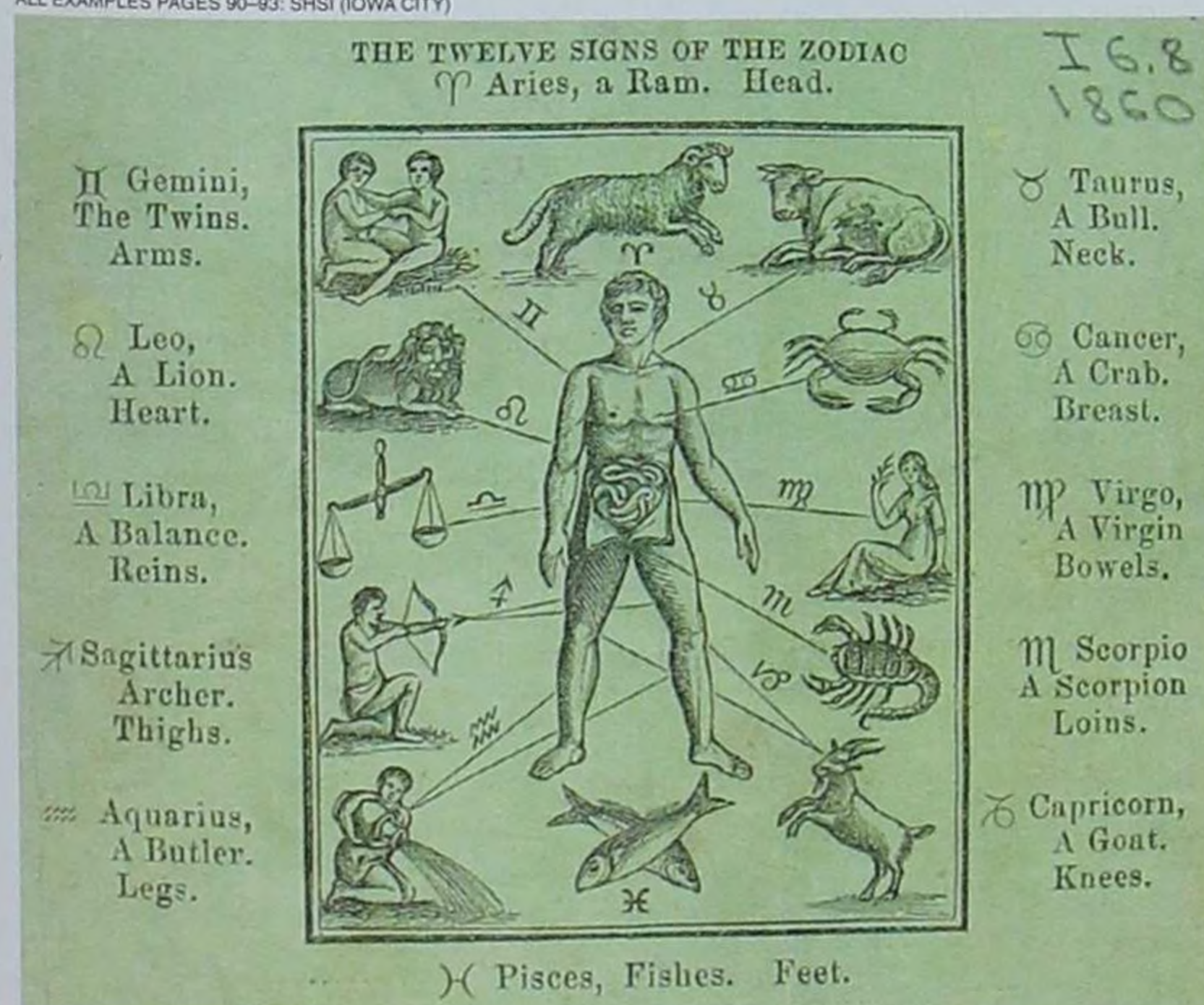
Household and horticultural advice was abundant, such as tips for fattening fowl, constructing beehives, growing grapes, and destroying bedbugs. Recipes and remedies were common fare. To treat sores, bruises, and burns, *The Northwestern Farmer Almanac* (published in Des Moines in 1862), recommended "Half a pound of rosin, half a pound of lard, quarter of a pound of beeswax; simmer all slowly together and strain through a thin cloth."

Because rural America was a major audience, almanacs often celebrated the benefits of farm life and discouraged young people from abandoning their lives of husbandry for the allure of city living. An 1864 almanac published in Dubuque argued that farmers enjoy lives of virtuous labor and good health, while city-dwelling merchants become nervous and eventually die "miserably."

Poking gentle fun at the aphorisms that were typical in almanacs, this same almanac presents this lighthearted story: "A mother admonishing a son, a lad seven years of age, told him that he should never defer till to-morrow what he could do to-day. The little urchin replied, 'Then, mother, let's eat the rest of the plum-pudding to-night.'"

An almanac often billed itself as a miscellany of "entertaining" material, such as a paragraph on British coal production or the lifespan of various mammals. (We might call these facts trivia today—though we're still likely to read them in spare moments.) Quotations by famous authors dotted the pages, as did verse and humor. In fact, almanacs seemed to provide something for everyone,

ALL EXAMPLES PAGES 90-93: SHSI (IOWA CITY)



The "Zodiac Man" or "Man of Signs" was a typical feature in almanacs from colonial days to the late 19th century. Astronomy, however, had as significant a presence as astrology. Dates were given for solstices and eclipses, morning and evening stars, and phases of the moon.



from charts for calculating interest to recipes for stewed celery. And for the bored, an almanac offered diversion. "I know of nothing new up here," an Iowa soldier in a Civil War camp wrote to his wife. "Times are quiet and dull. I have finished the almanac you sent me."

Publishers often had select audiences in mind. Immigrants could find almanacs printed in their native languages. The name of a denomination, Methodist or Presbyterian, for example, might appear in an almanac title. The partisan *American Banner* newspaper appealed to supporters of the anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic Know Nothing Party with its publication of *The Know Nothing Almanac, and True Americans' Annual* for 1855.

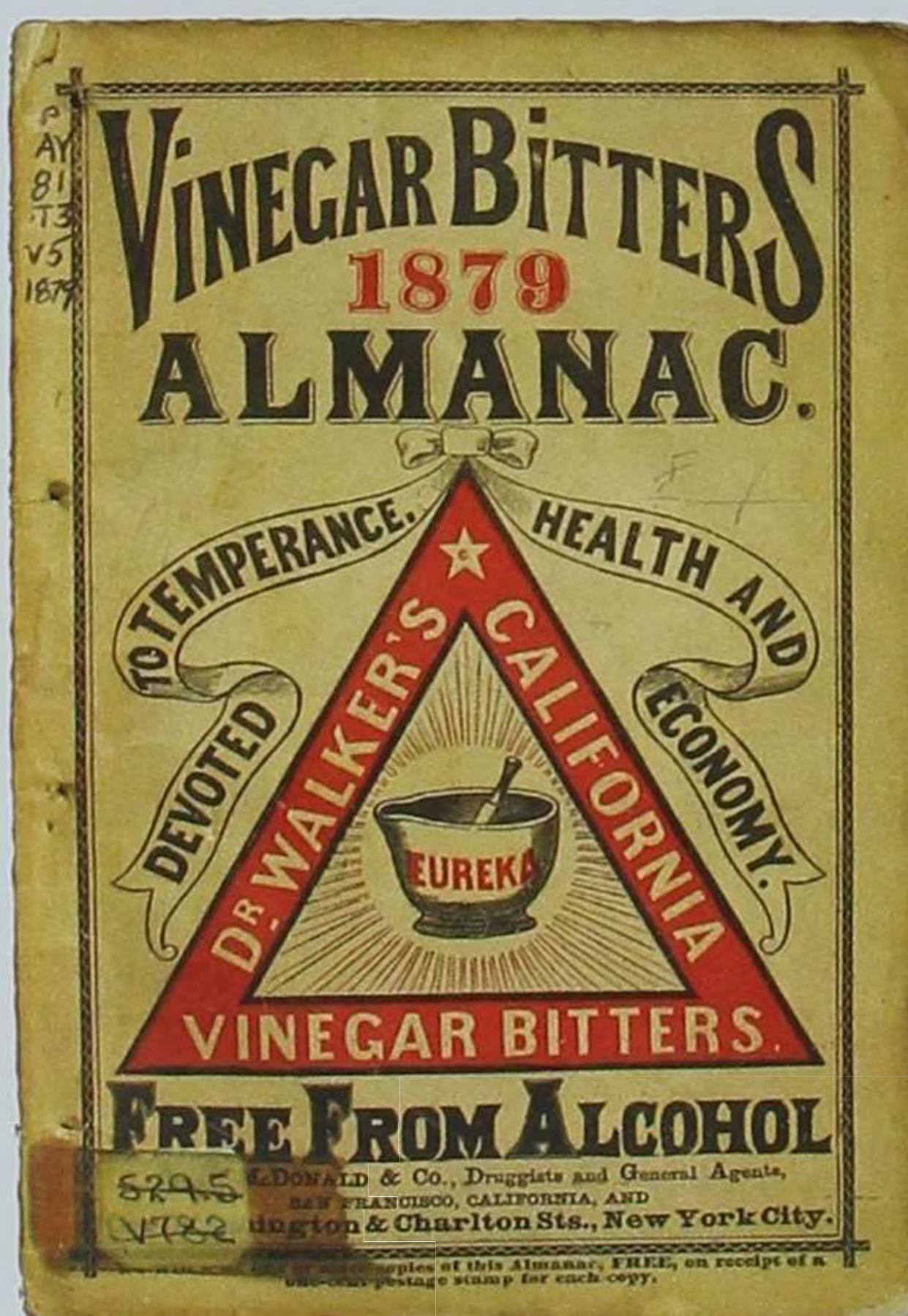
Increasing amounts of self-promotion and advertising characterized almanacs as early as the 1860s and well into the next century. Lee & Walker, a music publisher, distributed an almanac with the standard components of calendar and weather predictions, but they were followed by pages and pages of sheet music titles available for purchase. Horticultural periodicals published almanacs that were little more than promotional spin-offs, with a selection of reprinted engravings and short articles that their subscribers would have already seen.

Ads sometimes filled half of the yearly booklets. An 1882 Iowa almanac titled *The Washington County Press Annual* included an avalanche of advertisements for a local millinery, grocery, butcher shop, hotel, and windmill company, as well as a tombstone carver, jeweler, and photographer. Ads for crockery, farm implements, furniture, clothes wringers, and stoves were similar to those in the local newspapers. In fact, local newspapers often published almanacs and distributed them for free.

Patent medicine companies produced almanacs that were almost entirely promotional. They did not shy away from making lavish claims about their products. *Ayer's American Almanac* assured readers that Ayer's Cherry Pectoral "is annually the means of saving great numbers of valuable lives." The *Ladies Birthday Almanac* was filled with ads and testimonials for patent medicines to treat all manner of female maladies. Promoting Volcanic Oil Liniment, Dr. J. H. McLean's *Family Almanac* promised that "Rheumatism, Neuralgia and Nerve Pains will immediately yield to its MAGIC influence." The *Swamp-Root Almanac* made similar claims for its products. Patent medicine companies distributed thousands of these promotional almanacs to local pharmacies, which, in turn, had their own ads printed on the back, and then gave the little books free to their customers.

Published from our colonial era into the 20th century,

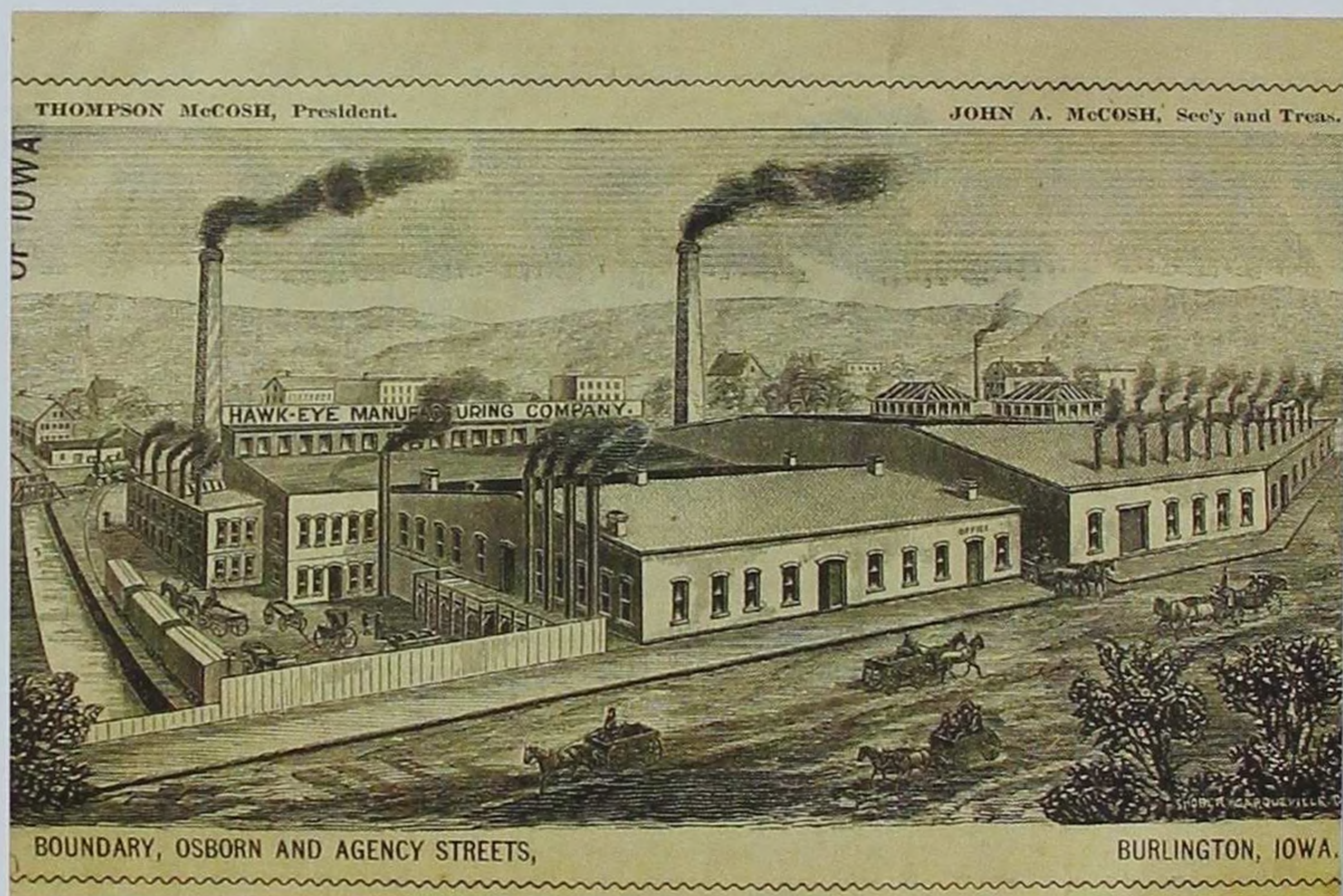
the ubiquitous almanac provides a window into the lives, values, buying habits, and even senses of humor of generations of Americans. In 1758, publisher Nathaniel Ames wondered if his modest little booklet could possibly survive for "two or three Centuries more." We can assure him that that almanac, as well as dozens of others, did indeed survive—here at the State Historical Society of Iowa. ♦



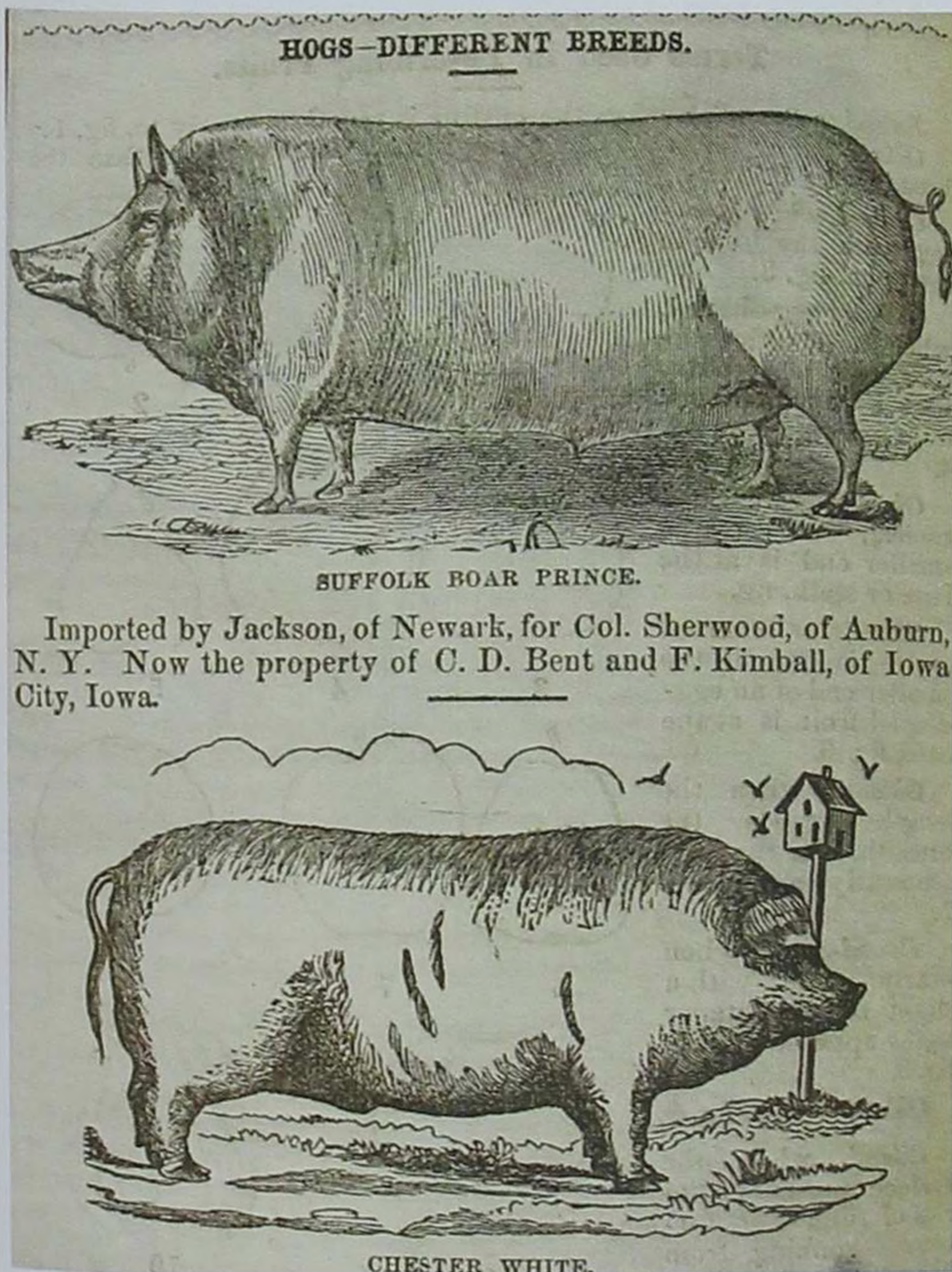
As almanacs evolved into commercial vehicles in the 19th century, advertisements often appeared on front and back covers and many pages inside. The one on the right was published in Burlington in 1884 by the Hawk-Eye Steel Barb Fence Co.

Kristina Huff earned a Ph.D. in English from the University of Delaware in 2012. Her dissertation is titled "Printing Friendship and Buying Feeling: Exchange and Gift Books in the Antebellum United States." She worked as a reference librarian for the State Historical Society of Iowa in Iowa City.





These pages from various Iowa almanacs reveal both subtle and blatant promotion. Clockwise from top left: a Lisbon drugstore ad; an engraving of a Burlington factory; an ad for a dealer for cookstoves; and a testimonial for hogs.





**ONE THOUSAND  
"FAVORITE" COOKING STOVES**

PER WEEK!

Is the number we can now produce. Dealers know we have been behind our orders each Spring and Fall for years. We have increased our capacity every year for the past eight years, and the present great demand is proof positive "FAVORITE" STOVES GIVE SATISFACTION.

Every Stove is warranted, and is a perfect Stove before it leaves our works. We would not ship a defective "FAVORITE" Cooking Stove for ten times its value.

FOR SALE BY

**A. F. Keith & Son,**  
Des Moines, Ia.